NATHANAEL WEST'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE FACTORY:
A REAPPRAISAL OF *THE DREAM LIFE OF BALSO SNELL*

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CHAPTER II
WEST GOES POP ART: THE NEW LAUGHTER

[Stash Stosz] is doing paintings based on the difference between good and evil. He uses cartoon characters a lot: Babalooey, Chilly Whilly, Bullwinkle, Mickey Mouse, and various Byzantine figures … Why don't you look at his work?

Tama Janowitz, *Slaves of New York* (1986)

Although West never transmogrified the rapid-fire sentences and compact paragraphs such as

> PATRONS, WAITERS, ETC.
>
> "He's drunk."
> "Greek gods! – does he think we don't know he's a Methodist?"
> "This is no time for blasphemy!"
> "A little learning goes to the head of fools."
> "Yes, drink deep of the Pierian spring or …"
> "Very picturesque though, 'Bromius! Iacchus!' very picturesque." (p.53)

and, even more truncated:

> hard-bitten. Casual. Smart. Been there before. I've had policemen. No trace of a feminine whimper. Decidedly revisiting well-known, well-plowed ground. No new trees, wells, or even fences. (p.61)

into the verbal balloons of comic strips, his admiration for this American popular art form is apparent on every single page of *Balso Snell*.

Many features of West's peculiar style can only be identified and interpreted in the neon-light of this "pop art" background. Surprisingly enough, there is only one critic to have perceived this. 15

The kind of "harmless entertainment" [16] West's generation grew up with in early 20th century America included newspaper comics and cartoons, slapstick comedy on film and in the theatre, and later, during "The Roaring Twenties", the short stories, plays, and filmscripts written by American humorists such as Ring Lardner and the Algonquin Round Table clique: Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woolcott, and George S. Kaufman, to mention some of the more illustrious names of this Golden Age of American Wit. [17]

West himself openly acknowledged his debt to the comic strip – a daring thing to do for an intellectual writer then as now, for until the late 1970s it was generally held that this art form was capable of seriously debilitating young people's minds. [18] Only over the past decade have *Donald Duck* and *Tintin* been elevated to happy hunting-grounds for French structuralists.

Before zooming in on some specific techniques West borrowed from the comic strip genre and related popular art forms, it should be realized that in the early days "the funnies" differed substantially from the sophisticated albums produced in Europe after World War II featuring middle-class heroes like *Tintin*. Neither did they have anything in common with the American "Superman" series, starting with *Popeye the Sailor* in *Thimble Theater*, followed by *Superman*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Batman* (a phenomenon of the 1930s and after) that became a huge success in Europe thirty years later.

The comic strip may be defined as

> A serially published, episodic, open-ended dramatic narrative or series of linked anecdotes about recurrent, identified characters, told in successive drawings regularly enclosing ballooned dialogue or its equivalent and minimized narrative text. [19]

The first American creative effort fitting in with this definition was R.F. Outcault's *Yellow Kid* (1896) from which the term "Yellow Papers" is derived. For these early comics all appeared in newspaper supplements, earning a full daily "comic page" of their own in 1912.

The most popular comic heroes roamed the pages of the so-called Hearst papers: the *Chicago Tribune, New York World* and the *New York Daily News*. They were branded telling, catchy names such as *Krazy Kat, Little Nemo, Buster Brown, Happy Hooligan*, and *The Katzenjammer* ["hang-over" in German] *Kids.*

These characters were drawn in truly cartoonesque style, rather crudely compared to today's output. West, himself a keen cartoonist, "transposed" these drawing techniques in depicting some of the characters in *Balso Snell*. The grotesquely deformed nose of Samuel Perkins (and corresponding genital regions of a college creep) and the

seven-foot-tall Lepi Janey Davenport baring her 144 teeth (pp. 33-4 and p.38) fit only too well within this frame of gross (sic) humour. In the early newspaper comics, each episode was covered by no more than a dozen frames or panels. This meant that the characters filling up half the space (room to swing a *Krazy Kat* in) could not afford to talk nineteen to the dozen, so to speak, in elaborate Jamesian paragraphs.

Sometimes, one fifth of each frame would be reserved for a "top" or "basement" strip. *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman started out this way, supporting *The Family Upstairs* (1911). West was to employ a similar device in *Balso Snell*, using stories and anecdotes, quotations and parody within the dream-within-the-dream, *ad infinitum*. One character in particular seems crushed by the avalanche of "top strips": Miss McGeeney, "the woman who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of Boswell" [who wrote the biography of Dr Johnson] (p.33), is also the authoress of an epistolary novel "in the manner of Richardson" (p.56), featuring the letters composed by Beagle Darwin, which reveal what would have happened if Janey Davenport had joined him in Paris. Structurally, *Balso Snell* is not so much a protest against *writing* books as a labyrinthine frame-up to drive well-meaning *readers* around the bend.

The ballooned dialogue and minimised narrative text of the pioneering strips were restricted to onomatopoeic outbursts, often complemented by snappy slang expressions and idiomatic puns in a unique hotchpotch of French *patois*, German *sauerkraut* accents, Yiddish, Spanish and American English. For this American medium was created (and devoured) by the large influx of immigrants from Europe around the turn of the century.

H.L. Mencken was quick to index the lexicographical consequences of this "alien power":

> The comic strip artist … has been a very diligent maker of terse and dramatic words. In his grim comments upon the horrible calamities which befall his characters he not only employs many ancients of English speech … but also invents novelties of his own, e.g. *zowie, bam, socko, yurp, plop, wow, wham, glug, oof, ulk, whap, bing, fooie,* and *grrr* … Their influence upon the general American vocabulary must be potent. 20

In Balso Snell's ludicrous name (and name-dropping) and the marvellous acoustics of the wooden horse many of the above-mentioned silly sounds ricochet, fired off in true slapstick tempo. Here is a random selection to be read aloud:

> Oh!, O!, Ah! [innumerable times] bah!, pooh-pooh, eh?, Hurrah!, Moooompitcher yaaaah, Ooh!, He's a wow!

> Hernia Hornstein, Paresis Pearlberg, Paranoia Puntz, Haldington Knape, Phil Beta Kappa, Darwin Beagle, Terry Kornflower

And “restricted” verbal balloon-like outbursts within a single paragraph:

> Eyes upset, murmurs love. Tiger skin on divan. Spanish shawl on grand piano. Altar of Love. Church and Brothel. Odors of Ind and Afric. There’s Egypt in your eyes. Rich, opulent love; beautiful, tapestried love; oriental, perfumed love. (p.60)

By the same token, names are contorted out of their original shape, rather in the way children discover language: “’O Byss! O Abyss! O Abyss O Anon! O Anan! [Ah Onan?] … O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach!’” (p.4)

Echoing this verbal *jujitsu*, there is a conspicuous amount of physicality in the early comics (cf. *The Katzenjammer Kids* by Rudolph Dirks), often culminating in rather sadistic, violent scenes that may have influenced the silent slapstick movies of Mack Sennett and Charlie Chaplin. [21]

By virtue of verbal silence (sound effects and honky-tonk piano music provided the “soundtrack”) or minimised dialogue in captions, body language and mime take over in silent movies and comic strips. In the same vein, Balso stumbles through his dream, violently shouting, singing and yelling most un-WASP-like obscenities and blasphemous songs, expressing himself in a very physical way:

> With a violent twist, Balso tore loose and fled. (p. 9)
>
> Balso threw the pamphlet away with a sigh. (p. 31)
>
> Throwing his arms around her, Balso interrupted her recitation by sticking his tongue into her mouth. (p. 32)

> Balso wanted to bash her jaw in. (p. 32)
>
> He hit Miss McGeeney a terrific blow in the gut and hove her into the fountain. (p. 36)
>
> He tipped his hat to her … and snatched her from the throng. (p. 38)
>
> Here Balso threw himself to the ground beside his beloved. (p. 60)

> The army of his body commenced a long intricate drill. (p. 62)
>
> His body screamed and shouted as it marched and uncoiled; then, with one heaving shout of triumph, it fell back quiet.
> (p. 62)

It is from these popular sources that West drew his inspiration for portraying violence and sex (nickelodeons showed so-called stag films and there had been pornographic comic strips from the turn of the century onwards). [22] Now that these two elements have become part and parcel of American literature, it is worth remembering that the established writers in the Great tradition of WASP literature (such as polished middle-class author Henry James, who died when West was thirteen) would have dismissed the raw prose of Balso Snell – featuring abortion, sadomasochism, anal puns, and attempted rape – as decidedly vulgar. [23] As Gilbert Seldes ironically observed,

> The comic strip … is specifically more violent, more dishonest, more tricky and roguish than America usually permits its serious arts to be … [comic strip characters] have so little respect for law, order, the rights of property, the sanctity of money, the romance of marriage, and all the other foundations of American life, that if they were put into fiction the Society for the Suppression of Everything [sic] would hale them incontinently to court and our morals would be saved again. [24]

The most unsettling aspect of Balso's (mis)behaviour – expressed verbally, musically, obscenely, iconoclastically, and physically, topped by a stream of sexual innuendo, excremental jokes and anal puns – is perhaps its quasi self-evident *thereness*. We do not know anything about Balso's upbringing, family relations, reasons for his anal fixation or regressive tendencies, adolescent traumas – none of that "David Copperfield kind of crap", to borrow a phrase from Holden Caulfield. [25]

West may have left the "violent acts" in *Balso Snell* "almost bald" [26] to stress that, as he wrote in *Some Notes on Violence* (1932),

> In America, violence is idiomatic … we did not start with the ideas of printing tales of violence. We now believe we would be doing violence by suppressing them. [An emotional description of violence may be] credible to an Englishman, yes, perhaps, or to a European, but not to an American. In America, violence is daily … What is melodramatic in European writing is not necessarily so in American writing. For a European writer to make violence real, he has to do a great deal of careful psychology and sociology. He often needs three hundred pages to motivate one little murder. But not so the American writer. His audience has been prepared and is neither surprised nor shocked if he

> omits artistic excuses for familiar events … He is far from the ancient Greeks, and still further from those people who need the naturalism of Zola or the realism of Flaubert to make writing seem “artistically true”. [27]

The archetypal European setting of *Balso Snell* highlights the Americanness of Balso’s violent acts. This is reinforced by his “American tourist-like” philistinism (p. 6). Balso’s rampant, materialistic attitude towards women voiced in greedy utterances such as “I swear it. I must have you. I must! I must!” (p. 39) is a precursor of this American attitude as maintained by that other innocent abroad, Gene “I want, I want, I want” Henderson in Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King* (1958). [28]

It should be stressed that despite the formal example of merry slapstick violence in silent movies and comic strips as sketched earlier, Balso’s behaviour is rooted in despair. It is born out of sexual and artistic frustration resulting in an irrational state of mind bordering on hysteria; the myriad of exclamation marks in *Balso Snell* are not merely a typographical hoax.

This “comedy of frustration”, to borrow a term applied to *Laurel and Hardy* slapstick, will be further discussed at a later stage. Although West liked to leave his violent prose almost bald, there is always a clue somewhere along the line.

Three distinct figures emerged from popular European folklore and fiction, making their way into American newspaper comics. [29] The “demon child”, going back to Heinrich Hoffmann’s *Struwwelpeter* (1845) and *Max und Moritz* (1865) by Wilhelm Busch, was modified into comics heroes such as *Yellow Kid, The Katzenjammer Kids, Buster Brown, and Little Sammy Sneeze.*

Secondly, the clownish innocent, a well-meaning fool derived from Dickens and Dostoyevsky, was immortalised in the pioneering strip *Happy Hooligan* (1900).

Thirdly, the humanised animal should be mentioned. This type had been familiar from Aesop’s *Fables*, Hans Christian Andersen’s *Fairy Tales,* and (to be fair to America) from the *Uncle Remus* series by J.C. Harris. A reincarnation of this particular type can be found in Mr Jack, a feline character in *Little Tigers* (1902), a progenitor of *Krazy Kat* and the countless fantasy animals in its “wacky” wake.

These three types would be employed by West throughout his oeuvre, a fact overlooked by literary critics. The fantasy animals bearing human traits in *Balso Snell* include a race of birdmen called the “Phoenix Excrementi” who “eat themselves, digest themselves, and give birth to themselves by evacuating their bowels” (p. 5); a flea

called Saint Puce, “a great martyred member of the vermin family”, whose grotesque biography is being written by Mr Maloney [who talks “baloney”] (pp. 10-13); Mr and Mrs Amblyornis Inornata, two ugly birds, and their beautiful cousin, Mrs Bird of Paradise (pp. 26-7).

Balso Snell himself is clearly a middle-aged amalgamate of the first two types mentioned above, the demon child and the clownish innocent. His first name combines a clownesque ring with obscene connotations of testicularity, and his surname is an obvious pun on the smell around him, reinforced by the well-known abusive meaning of his initials. It also conjures up rapidity, a fast pace of action – *schnell* meaning “quick” in German.

Furthermore, Balso’s ballyhoo, kicking, repetitive jangling (the aforementioned “I must!”), yelling obscenities and churning out an endless diarrhoea of “pooh-pooh” fun and games all contribute to the image of the all too familiar American phenomenon of the terrible brat. [30] More psycho-pathological aspects of Balso’s high jinks and the case of John Raskolnikov Gilson (pp. 13-31), a precocious kid fitting the “demon child” vignette, will later be examined in more detail.

Another “childish” facet of Balso’s personality concerns his self-centredness, culminating verbally in his “elaborate” sigh of self-pity “Ah youth! … Ah Balso Snell!” (p. 23). Balso’s piece of advice to Mr Maloney to take his eyes off his navel (p. 13) seems rich, coming from such an egotist. His typically Western narcissism (the ancient Greeks invented it) is mercilessly ridiculed by way of presenting a comic collection of historical navels (possibly a new literary genre): the one belonging to the Trojan Horse proves to be “a cul-de-sac” (p. 3), the “Navel of Our Lord” is described as a fathomless well” (p. 12), and John Raskolnikov Gilson writes in his Crime Journal, “I was a bundle of

physical and mental tics. I climbed into myself like a bear into a hollow tree, and lay there long hours, overpowered by the heat, odor, and nastiness of I” (p. 17). Physically, Balso’s narcissism reaches an appropriate peak in his orgasm following a wet dream starring Mary McGeeney; the repetition of “*his* body” [italics mine] and the image of an army (p. 62), possibly a playful echo of “Ah me!”, indicate that his climax is as sterile as Dorothy Parker’s canary named Onan (“because he spills his seed upon the ground”). [31]

We may even wonder if Balso has ever stepped out of his cultivated Self to have intercourse with the Other, judging by his elaborate seduction speeches (pp. 58-60). He simply seems to be trying too hard, spoiling the whole affair by overplaying his hand, so to speak.

This picture of immaturity personified is completed by his escapism. Whenever Mr Snell cannot bear to face the music after an argument, he starts screaming and exits violently – a child to a tee. All

the “writers in search of an audience” (p. 37) he visits inside the Trojan Horse would be right in declaiming *unisono* that “Balso flees from us that sometime did us seke”, to adapt a line from Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Having examined various influences from the world of comics (on paper and celluloid), affecting vocabulary, rhythm and narrative pace, lay-out, description of violent, physical scenes and types of character, as well as the multi-layered narrative sequence in top/basement strip” fashion, one semi-literary popular art genre ought to be added.

For West was also profoundly influenced by the humorists mentioned earlier who made the readers of *The New Yorker* roar during the Twenties and early Thirties. The wit generated by the Algonquinites was based on the sardonic wise-crack, the quick repartee, and the lightning-fast pun.

George S. Kaufman’s wit as displayed in his Broadway production of *Animal Crackers* (1928) was “brittle, quick, thrown out almost too fast to catch”. [32] The ideal performers of this very *American* comedy material were the Marx Brothers: Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo. It is no coincidence that “Balso” should fit in perfectly by virtue of his name, because he plays much the same game as these anarchic clowns.

Balso fluctuates between wise-guy attitudes (as personified by Groucho Marx) in his verbal ping-pong match with the tour guide (p. 6) following the plethora of puns in the opening pages, and beguiling innocence (immortalised by Harpo Marx) in his pathetic overtures to Miss McGeeney and Janey Davenport (pp. 56-61 and pp. 38-40).

Sometimes this word-play is over his head –

> With a high heart he entered the gloom of the foyer-like lower intestines … To keep his heart high and yet out of his throat, he made a song (p. 4) –

which employs the kind of verbal leap-frogging roughly similar to a famous gag-line by Groucho in *Animal Crackers* “One day I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I’ll never know”. [33]

S.J. Perelman, West’s close friend and brother-in-law, wrote scripts for the Marx Brothers and has suggested that this peculiarly verbal sense of humour and the ultimate success of Jewish-American humorists and entertainers (Kaufman, Parker, the Marx Brothers, and, one might add, verbal virtuoso S.J. Perelman himself) derived from the comic misunderstandings among Jewish immigrants struggling with the English language [West’s and Perelman’s own parents!] and mixing up idiomatic expressions. [34] Indeed, puns and word-play are not a conspicuous feature in the “talkies” of Anglo-American performers such as Chaplin and Laurel & Hardy.

The master of this type of humour was the third Marxian, Chico, who pretended to be an Italian Brooklyn Jew (!) forever misunderstanding and mispronouncing English words – when Groucho mentions the word “viaduct”, for example, Chico wonders, “Yes, why a duck?”.

Some of this Jewish humour is rather childish and crude, and Balso Snell is well aware of this:

> What a pity childish associations cling to beautiful words such as hernia, making their use as names impossible. Hernia! What a beautiful name for a girl! Hernia Hornstein! Paresis Pearlberg! Paranoia Puntz! (p.7)

The anal and excremental jokes in *Balso Snell* are delivered in such a frantic, obsessive tempo, often “covered up” by a mock-flowery style, as in “O the Rose Gate! O the Moist Garden! O Well! O Fountain! O Sticky Flower! O Mucous Membrane! (p. 5), or tucked away in a literary allusion (“O Anus Mirabilis!” (p. 3) – an irreverent reference to John Dryden’s *Annus Mirabilis* [1667] – that may have contributed to the general uncensored flavour of the book.

This is of course the wonderful thing about *double entendre* jokes and phrases: one can always pretend that the risqué part had been unintended. Groucho Marx once said that he enjoyed his cigar,

but had to take it out every now and then after a contestant on a game show had told him she loved her husband so much she had borne him twenty children; the woman just stared at him, nobody laughed, and Groucho just rolled his eyes.

As Dorothy Parker quipped, “Brevity is the soul of lingerie, said the petticoat to the chemise”; it is also the soul of West’s wit in *Balso Snell*, which occasionally suffers from what the Algonquinites called the “fate of performing seals: say something funny!”. [35]

Most of the original trouvailles and “athletic prose” stay in the mind for their malicious finishing touch: “’Oh! His mouth formed an O with lips torn angry in laying duck’s eggs from a chicken’s rectum” (p. 57) and “His Adam’s apple was very large … When he swallowed, his neck bulged out and he made a sound like a miniature toilet being flushed” (p. 18) and “Death is still like putting on a wet suit – shivery” (p. 44).

One last comic sphere of influence ought to be mentioned before moving on to more high-brow vistas. This source of inspiration for every American humorist centres on Ring Lardner and his “disciple” S.J. Perelman, who confessed to having been “such a shameless Lardner thief I should have been arrested”). [36] The Algonquinites all

acknowledged Lardner as a master, and his comic short stories were admired by Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald. [37]

Lardner had a remarkable ear for American vernacular speech, the clichés and trite idiom of the common man, of Chaplin's "Little Fellow", so to speak. The banal life-stories of Lardner's run-of-the-mill Americans are spiced with the kind of black, sardonic humour both West and Perelman relished:

> You know, in most towns of any size, when a man is dead and needs a shave, why the barber that shaves him soaks him five dollars for the job; that is, he don't soak *him*, but whoever ordered the shave. I just charge three dollars because personally I don't mind much shavin' a dead person. They lay a whole lot stiller than live customers. The only thing is that you don't feel like talkin' to them and you get kind of lonesome. ("Haircut") [38]

The way to this lively, ungrammatical lingo had been paved by Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Twain, Lardner and Hemingway started out as reporters, with no academic background. They did not need one, for as Lardner put it in "How to Write Short Stories", using idiosyncratic spelling and grammar:

> When you skim through the pages of high class periodicals, you don't very often find them cluttered up with stories that was written by boys or gals who had win their phi beta skeleton keys at this or that story-writing college. In fact, the most of the successful authors of the short fiction of today never went to no kind of college, or if they did, they studied piano tuning or the barber trade. They could of got just as far in what I call the literary game if they had stayed home those four years and helped mother carry out the empty bottles. [39]

Having emptied one bottle too many himself, Lardner died at the age of 48. The fact is that Perelman and West *did* attend an Ivy League university, and would combine the tongue-in-cheek Lardnerian style with a plethora of learned allusions to European literature. [40] The peculiar mixed bag produced by this deliberate contrast between the high-flown and the banal accounts for much of the comic exuberance in *Balso Snell*.

Just before he died, Perelman laid down an important Law of Comedy: "There's nothing so tiresome as nonsense put upon nonsense". [41]

His most effective humorous pieces for *The New Yorker* (profoundly admired by West) are indeed the ones that take something "ornary" as a starting-point: a newspaper ad or clipping, a recipe, a dime novel, or a dull party. [42]

Once this referential beacon has been established, the reader may take a plunge into a maelstrom of literary allusions, clichés and sayings turned topsy-turvy, exotic words, and outrageous names like Lois De Fee, Poultney Groin, Gossip Gabrilowitch (a lady bouncer, a playboy, and a Polish pianist, respectively). [43]

West used this comic strategy quite successfully in *Balso Snell*, especially in Balso's encounter with Maloney the Areopagite (pp. 9-13). Mr Maloney's credentials are all verifiable and the religious allusions are real enough, but his martyrdom is ridiculed by adroit insertion of ludicrous details: he attempts "to crucify himself with thumb tacks" and has "decided to write the biography of Saint Puce, a great martyred member of the vermin family … who was born, lived, and died, beneath the arm of Our Lord … and later wrote his great work, *A Geography of Our Lord*". [44]

In addition, the very setting of *Balso Snell*, the anus of a wooden horse encompassing a café, a foyer, and tourist sites pointed out by a guide ("First you will please look to the right where you will see a beautiful Doric prostrate gland swollen with gladness and an over-

abundance of good cheer", p. 6) owes much to Perelman's zany wit, which produced titles like *Through the Fallopian Tubes on a Bicycle* (1930). [45]

The comic clash of banal clichés and exuberant wit is particularly well-developed – beyond the one-liner – in the passages featuring Janey Davenport's attitude towards *Eros*, and Darwin Beagle's response to *Thanatos*, to use the appropriate Greek terms in keeping with the setting. Having been chatted up by Balso, Janey

> Gazed out over the blue waves of the Mediterranean and felt the delight of being young, rich, beautiful … She had never before known the thrill of being subdued by a male from a different land … now she knew the thrill she had never known before … had found it in the strength of this young and tall, strangely wise man, caught like herself in the meshes of the greatest net human hearts can know: Love. (p. 38)

This is the swollen rhetoric of romantic pulp fiction satirised in Perelman's "How to Make Love" (1929):

> What is that Mysterious Force which hastens the breathing, makes the heart tender, the spirit brave, the impulses generous and the will strong? Yes, children, you are right – Scotch. But there is still another Force which does not retail in four-fifths quart bottles and is infinitely more expensive. This Force is called LOVE. 46

Nor can Janey's response to the lewd passes Balso makes at her be labelled as original by any stretch of the imagination:

> From her lips – overhung by a moist eye and underhung by a heaving embonpoint – there came, "Love is a strange thing … [it] is beautiful. You, Balso, do not love. Love is sacred. How can you kiss if you do not love? … Would you want someone to ask of your sister what you ask of me? … I prefer music … Love, with me, Mr Snell, is sacred. I shall never debase love, or myself, or the memory of my mother, in a hallway. Act your education, Mr Snell. Tumbling in hallways at my age! How can you? After all, there are the eternal verities, not to speak of the janitor. And besides, we were never properly introduced." (p. 39)

The only character that seems bothered by these hackneyed reactions to the facts of life and death is Darwin Beagle. When Janey is pregnant [that is, in Beagle's first letter] she is accused of indulging her misery: "After the first moments of hysterical anguish are over, you wrap your predicament around you, snuggling into it … Your big trouble shelters you from a host of minor troubles. You are so miserable" (p. 43).

When Beagle hears about her "suicide" following her self-indulgent, corny misery he ponders several stereotyped ways of responding –

> Of what assistance could I have been? Should I have gone down on my knees in the street and wept over her dead body? Torn my hair? Called on the Deity? Or should I have gone calmly up to the policeman and said: "I'm her husband. Allow me to accompany you to the morgue." (p. 49) –

wondering whether "she was able to avoid generalizing before she killed herself" for he is "sure it was not trouble, that was uppermost in her mind, but the rag-tag of some philosophy" (p. 50).

Living up to his mock-scientific name (ship plus pioneering Evolutionist), Beagle Darwin sees right through people who think that "Love, Life, Death … could be contained in an epigram" (p. 50); in his second letter, this Darwin dons a scientific mask to express why Janey is unfit to survive (to paraphrase the real Darwin): "I tried to make my treatment of your suicide as impersonal as possible. I did my best to keep the description of both of our characters scientific and just" (p. 47), condemning Janey's death as a joke,

> a very old and well-known way out of a very old and stale predicament. The moth and the candle, the fly and the spider, the butterfly and the rain, the clown and the curtain, all could be cited as having prepared one [oh how tediously!] for her suicide." [West's brackets] pp. 51-52).

Although Janey had a point, saying that she was tired of "laugh, laugh, laugh", wanting "to retain some portion of [her]self unlaughed at" (p. 41), Beagle is surely right in ridiculing her well-worn, banal complaints, for the unwanted pregnancy and suicide exist only in the story relating what would have happened *if* Beagle had taken her to Paris! [47] This story is told by Beagle in two letters (pp. 40-56) from a revolutionary second person singular perspective, decades before Michel Butor's *La modification* (1957) would receive credit for this "innovative" form. [48]

The price Beagle has to pay for this insight and honesty consists of excessive bookishness ("literature has deeply dyed my brain its own color ... making it impossible for me to tell where literature ends and I begin", p. 47), alcoholism and a theatrical form of schizophrenia. He ends up blind-drunk [for he is the only one who can *see*] at a Parisian café bearing the macabre name "Carcas"; the truth is harder to swallow than the half a dozen cognacs he has ordered.

If wine, women and song provide the only escape route out of this world, then John Gilson clearly opts for the second outlet. For his predicament is very similar to Beagle's, and so is his realisation of the human condition:

> Death is a very difficult thing for me to consider sincerely because I find certain precomposed judgments awaiting my method of consideration to render it absurd. No matter how I form my comment I attach to it the criticisms sentimental, satirical, formal. With these judgments there goes a series of literary associations which remove me still further from genuine feeling. The very act of recognizing Death, Love, Beauty – all the major subjects – has become, from literature and exercise, impossible. (pp. 24-5)

Of course, this insight forms an act of recognition in itself. If there are no choices to be made, simply because every point of view has been flogged to death in life and art, then "the major subjects" can only be discussed in a jaded, highly derivative way. This conclusion lies at the root of the actual textual material in *Balso Snell*, for it consists solely of the "pop art" devices and pulp fiction clichés examined above, and the parody, pastiche, burlesque and allusive literary forms to be examined below.

Thus, a perfect blend of form and content is presented by West. When the tour guide, a name-dropping Jewish connoisseur of art like young Weinstein himself, quotes George Moore's statement that "Art is

a sublime excrement" (p. 8), this is surely an apt metaphor for the basic sources employed in *Balso Snell*: the waste matter of Western civilisation that comes out of Homer's Trojan Horse.

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ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER 2

15. See Harold L. Beaver, "Nathanael West's 'Chamber of American Horrors'" [pre-print by courtesy of Professor Beaver; to be published in a collection on the American short novel], p. 1: "West's first completed work ... was really a kind of undergraduate romp conceived in the form of a comic strip ... More literate critics might call it a surrealist revue; but it was surrealism transformed to a parody of the jagged jumps and colliding frames of the cartoon". Unfortunately, Prof. Beaver does not explore any comic in particular. See also Harold Beaver, *The Great American Masquerade* (London: Vision Press, 1985), pp. 216-220) on West, and Reid, op.cit., pp. 84-91 for a glimpse of the role visual arts play in West's subsequent novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts.*

16. The phrase has been borrowed from Richard Maltby, (Exeter: University Film Course, 1987). *Harmless Entertainment*

17. See James R. Gaines, *Wit's End* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1979) for an entertaining account of this club. The Algonquin Hotel is in New York. West's work was admired by most writers on *The New Yorker*, such as Parker, Kaufman, Woolcott, Thurber, and of course his brother-in-law S.J. Perelman. West had read Lardner's short fiction by 1920, and drew a cartoon series satirising his "baseball lingo" as Art Editor of *The Paradoxian,* a summer camp magazine. See Martin, op.cit., p. 101 and p. 44.

18. See Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart & Co, 1954), whose blurb claims that comic books are an invitation to illiteracy, create an atmosphere of cruelty and deceit, stimulate unwholesome fantasies, suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas, and so forth.

19. Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams, eds., *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (1977; rpt. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986), p. 13.

20. See H.L. Mencken, *The American Language* (1919), quoted in: Ibidem, p. 10.

21. See David Robinson, *Chaplin* (London: Collins, 1985), p. 107: Sennett's "Keystone films derived from vaudeville, circus, comic strips, and at the same time from the realities of early 20th century America".

22. In addition to violent comics, there were "underground" cartoons called *Tijuana Bibles* (sic) in which the sex-lives of movie stars and comic heroes were depicted. Their names were slyly transformed from Garbo, Harlow and Bow into Greta Garbage, Jean Harlot, and Clara Blow. See Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon II* (New York: New American Library, 1985), pp. 272-3. For a history of early blue movies, see Al Di Lauro and Gerald Rabkin, *Dirty Movies* (New York: Chelsea House, 1976), esp. pp. 41-51. West may well have been the first American novelist to spoof these vintage stag films in his fourth novel, *The Day of the Locust*, see also note 64 to Ch. 3 of this thesis.

23. Miss McGeeney's "two noes graded into two yes-and-noes [grading into] Yes ... Yes ... Ooh! Ah! (pp. 60-1) are based on the male myth that what all women are really is "a good rape". See also *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 82: "they've all got three names ... Mary Roberts Wilcox, Ella Wheeler Catheter, Ford Mary Rineheart [West's version of American novelists Mary Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather, Mary Roberts Rineheart mixed with the English male novelist Ford Madox Ford] ... what they all needed was a good rape".

24. See Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924), quoted in: Blackbeard, op.cit., p. 164.

25. See J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 5.

26. See Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss L." (1933), in: Jay Martin, ed., *Nathanael West* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 66-7.

27. See Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Violence" (1932), ibidem, pp. 50-1.

28. See Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (1958; rpt. New York: The Viking press, 1959), p. 9: "I came, a great weight, a huge shadow on those stairs, with my face full of country color and booze, and

yellow pigskin gloves on my hands, and a ceaseless voice in my heart that said, *I want, I want, I want, oh, I want – yes, go on*" [italics S.B.].

29. See Blackbeard, op.cit., pp. 19-20. Like Balso, characters in the comics had their dream lives: see *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and *The Naps of Polly Sleepyhead*. The grotesque *art nouveau* drawings must have appealed to West.

30. This particular type would live on in the still popular *Dennis the Menace* comic strip.

31. See Gaines, op.cit, p. 77.

32. Ibidem, p. 196.

33. Ibidem.

34. A typical Perelman dialogue based on this joke mechanism is the following from *Horse Feathers* (1932):
Secretary: "The Dean is furious. He's waxing wroth."
Groucho: "Oh, is Roth out there, too? Tell Roth to wax the Dean for a while.". See Dorothy Herrmann, *S.J. Perelman: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 85. They don't write lines like that anymore. Perelman himself disclosed his "theory" about this type of Jewish humour to Groucho Marx during a double interview with Kenneth Tynan. See ibidem, p. 74.

35. Both quotations are taken from an Oscar-winning TV documentary about the Algonquinites shown on Belgian TV, *The Ten-Year Lunch* (BRT I, 24 August, 1988).

36. See Herrmann, op.cit., p. 64.

37. See Gaines, op.cit., pp. 102-3.

38. See Ring Lardner, *The Best of Ring Lardner* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1984), p. 10.

39. Ibidem, p. 207.

40. Although both men were widely read (West astonishingly so), their status as Brown University intellectuals seems rather shaky: West (born Nathan Weinstein) enrolled using 57 credits (!) earned by a namesake from Boston, and S.J. Perelman never graduated because he flunked Trigonometry time and again. He was pleased to receive an honorary doctorate of letters in 1965. See Herrmann, op.cit., pp. 32-3 and p. 44.

41. Ibidem, p. 112. Perelman died in 1979, outliving West by nearly four decades.

42. See S.J. Perelman, *The Most of S.J. Perelman* (1958; rpt. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), part one (1930-44). It is noteworthy that in real life, West talked “clichés in italics”. See Victor Comerchero, *Nathanael West* (1964; rpt. Seattle: UWP, 1967), p. 45.

43. The original composer is called Ossip. Perelman made up fantastic names like “Iphigenia Horowitz” when at high school, which may account for the mock-Jewish names in *Balso Snell* (esp. p. 7); he seems to have exchanged many a funny phrase with his brother-in-law West.

44. Wells Root, a friend of the 1930s, claimed that on the subject of Catholicism, West “could talk for hours … he had an incredible array of facts, from earliest Church history to the present”. See Martin, op.cit., p. 58. See also my note (101) on Mr Maloney’s Biblical origins as an Areopagite.

45. West’s reference to a swollen prostrate gland in this passage, later followed by a remark on gonorrhea (*Balso Snell*, p. 51) must be interpreted as a peculiar and rather unprofessional private joke, for West seems to have arrived on Brown campus with gonorrhea in 1921, “suffering very intensely … contracting the same disease in 1923”. During the curative treatments, “his prostrate gland was slightly damaged and would cause him recurring pain for the rest of his life”. In 1935, it “became swollen to the size of an orange”, giving West a permanent “false erection”, a disease known as Priapism. See Martin, op.cit., p. 133 and pp. 266-7.

46. See Herrmann, op.cit., p. 59.

47. There is an element of truth in Beagle's letters. Both Janey's unwanted pregnancy and planned suicide are mentioned to Balso, in her request to kill Beagle: "He betrayed me. In this hump on my back I carry his child. After you've killed him, I shall yield my pink and white body to you, and then commit suicide" (p. 39).

48. See Michel Butor, *La modification* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957).

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